

# The art of uncertainty

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## The enigma machines

Two key concepts for historians of western art are ‘theatricality’ and ‘absorption’. Under the first category come the theatrical scenes from the bible or classical mythology favoured by a Rubens; under the second, the quietly absorbed figures in a genre scene by Vermeer, perhaps reading a letter, playing music, or fingering an object. In ‘theatrical paintings’, it is the dramatic action that captures viewers’ attention, encouraging them to think through the narrative and imaginatively reconstruct the earlier and later episodes, and to engage with the actors. ‘Absorbed’ figures, on the other hand, are generally free of any narrative context: who are they? Why are they so deep in thought? Try as they might to provide a ‘story’ for these enigmatic subjects, viewers can never understand their past or their fate. What engages us in their case is not the dramatic action of which the painter provides but a momentary glimpse, but the evident distraction of the figure from their surroundings, the very fact that the world immediately around them has become irrelevant to them. And that preoccupation precisely mirrors the effect that the picture itself has on viewers: it draws them out of their everyday surroundings, and into a contemplation matching the painted figure’s for inscrutability. ‘Absorbed’ figures call for absorbed viewers.

We can find both absorbed and theatrical figures in classical Greek sculpture. There are the absorbed figures on classical grave reliefs, who sit or stand, relating to each other or to some object. There is no drama here, no ‘narrative’; it is the contemplation of death and separation that is being portrayed (which we are invited to share). A fine example of such a figure is Hegeso, the elaborately dressed woman in the most famous of grave reliefs from the late fifth century B.C., who sits and contemplates the jewellery that she removes from a casket. Equally, however, classical art provides figures in dramatic action. Not just the centaurs and lapiths or Greeks and amazons of mythological battles whose exploits adorned the metopes of the Parthenon and frieze of the classical temple of Apollo at Bassae, but also the single-standing figures of the Discus Thrower, the Zeus from Artemisium hurling a thunderbolt, and equally the bronze boy (once on horseback) who gesticulates eagerly as he jockeys for position.

## Absorber the Greek

Yet as soon as we attempt to divide classical sculpture into the absorbed and the theatrical we come across a problem. There is quite a body of figures of which we want to say that they are both absorbed and also theatrical. This is true even of some single figures, such as Lysippos’ late-classical statue the *Apoxyomenos* (‘athlete scraping himself down’): this is a figure with a strong theatrical gesture as he throws out his arm to skim off the sweat with his strigil. He is a figure too with a narrative: his gesture situates him in the regular routine of going to the gym, exercising, and then cleaning up ready to resume some less strenuous activity of civic life. This may not be a particularly ‘dramatic’ narrative, in that it is not related to any specific character in any specific story; but it nonetheless invites the viewer to supply a story, well-known from life if not from literature. And this conjunction of theatricality and absorption is even more obviously the state of a good number of figures from mythology: in

the early-classical metopes from the temple of Zeus at Olympia, for example, Heracles is absorbed not only in the rather static scenes in which he holds up the world while Atlas fetches for him the apples of the Hesperides, or presents the Stymphalian birds to Athena; absorption seems to be just the right term, too, for the ‘theatrical’ scene in which Heracles, poised in perfect balance, combats the Marathonian bull.

What makes for this combination of absorption and theatricality is the presence of uncertainty. This uncertainty may not always be especially forceful. In the case of Lysippos’ statue, for example, we have no reason to believe that the athlete is contemplating some particularly crucial life choice; and in the mythological scenes, our uncertainty about the outcome of the particular moment represented is balanced by our awareness of the ending of the story in question. But in all these cases, we see subjects making their choices before our eyes, and for them at least their future might lead in a number of quite different directions.

## Virgin trains

The power of uncertainty to stimulate reflection on the part of the viewer can be seen even in the famous sculptures of the Athenian Parthenon (or ‘temple of the virgin goddess’, i.e. Athena). The central scene of the east frieze, in particular, has fuelled an endless debate among scholars. In the centre of the frieze, at the point of meeting between the two processions of horsemen, cattle and so on, we see two female figures approaching from the left with bundles on their heads. These are received by another female figure, and we see a male figure either receiving from or passing to a much smaller, juvenile, figure a folded piece of cloth. Every aspect of this scene has been debated: what are the bundles? How old are the figures? Is the young figure on the right male or female? Why has (s)he been portrayed with a single bare buttock?

Most scholars have taken the folded piece of cloth to be the specially woven garment presented to a statue of Athena as part of the ritual of the Panathenaic (or ‘all-Athenian’) festival. But if this is that garment, is it the new one, about to be put on the statue? Or is it the old one, being taken off the statue? If modern scholars are unsure, would not ancient viewers have been too? Perhaps the scene was always uncertain? Indeed, uncertainty makes good sense here in terms of the religious significance of the scene. The ritual involved substitution: the removal of the old garment took place just as a new one to be offered. In leaving it uncertain whether this is the old cloth or the new one, the sculpture points in both directions, towards the past and the future. That is what rituals are all about: creating links between the traditions of the past and the practice of the future.

## Naked truths?

Perhaps the most famous of Greek statues is the so-called Aphrodite of Cnidus, by Praxiteles. In antiquity, the fame of this sculpture lay in its representation of divine nakedness. What makes this Aphrodite really shocking, however, is not that she is unclothed, but that she is uncertain. Certainly, naked statues had not been a regular feature of earlier Greek art; but naked women form part of the decoration of an early Cretan temple,

mythological figures such as Cassandra were shown naked on Greek pottery, and the fashion for 'wet look' drapery in late fifth century sculpture left little to the imagination of the viewer of the Parthenon pediments. What is different about the Aphrodite of Cnidus is not so much that we can see all of her body, but that we cannot pin her down her thoughts. There she stands, towel in one hand, making a rather inadequate attempt to protect her modesty with the other. Has she been bathing, or is she about to bathe?

But that is the least of it. She looks up, her attention caught. She has perceived something happening. But not only can we not tell what she has perceived, we cannot tell whether or not she was expecting it. Her facial expression is entirely enigmatic. Should we read shock, supplying the story that some stranger has entered her visual field? Is the movement of the hand to be a pathetic reaction to real vulnerability? Or should we read pleasure, assuming that she is confronting the person she was waiting for, was bathing for? Given the dreadful things that happen to mortals who see goddesses bathing, whether this visitor was expected or not really matters. But we cannot know. Here is a statue poised between the theatricality of a drama in which violence will be done to the unseen visitor (whose place the viewer – the male viewer, at any rate – can easily occupy), and the absorption of a goddess of love who has just realised that the substance of her dreams has just arrived.

Humans can know the past, but must remain uncertain about the future. Those gifted with foresight rarely persuade other men until events have proved them right – think of Cassandra, Laocoon, Teiresias. Religious rituals were part of the way in which men ordered their own lives and hoped to ensure order in a world that they could not control. But at the end of the day, humans had to accept that the gods were quixotic: disaster might strike anyone at any time, but so might the greatest of good fortune. In creating scenes that the viewer cannot decode with ultimate certainty, classical sculptors brought those who entered the sanctuaries that their works adorned face to face with the most fundamental bind of human life.

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